



UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

Driven to Discover<sup>SM</sup>Voices  
from the  
Gaps 

# Mai Neng Moua

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*Although the Hmong have not had a tradition of written language, we are building one. We are the creators of our own history from this point on.*

— Bamboo Among the Oaks, Introduction

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## Biography

Throughout American history, questions regarding the authenticity and ability of individual writers to claim the right to represent the American experience have sparked controversy. A recent development in this debate has been the addition of Hmong-American voices to the canon of American literature.

At the forefront of this issue is Mai Neng Moua, a Hmong writer and editor who has worked for over a decade to draw out and amplify Hmong-American voices in publications such as the Hmong literary journal *Paj Ntaub Voice*, and an anthology of Hmong literature called *Bamboo Among the Oaks*, published in 2002. Both are extraordinary efforts to advance Hmong literature, and even more impressive because a written Hmong language has only existed since the latter half of the 20th century.

### Quick Facts

- \* Born in 1974
- \* Hmong-American writer and literary activist
- \* Founded the *Paj Ntaub Voice*

This page was researched and submitted by Heather Herbaugh, Jim Schmit, and Lydia Nobello on May 6, 2004.



# Mai Neng Moua

## Biography continued

It is said that the Hmong of Laos may have had a written language but it had been lost several centuries ago. Then in the 1950s, French Catholic missionaries transliterated Hmong using the Roman alphabet. Of course, this did not immediately give birth to an entire Hmong written tradition. However, it did allow access to a new media of expression for Hmong people, especially for those who experienced the hostility and danger of the U.S. War in Vietnam.

The Hmong were significantly involved in the war, and many Hmong men fought for the United States against its communist foes. However, U.S. withdrawal from southeast Asia in the early 1970s led to the displacement of many Hmong by the Communist Lao of the Laotian lowland. Among the displaced Hmong were Mai Neng Moua and her family. Born on May 5, 1974, in Laos, Moua was the middle child and only girl of three children. When she was three years old, her father was killed in the war, and a few years later, Moua's family moved to a refugee camp in Thailand. There, Moua's newly widowed mother struggled to care for and protect her three young children until 1981 when the family emigrated to the United States.

They were originally placed in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, but in 1987, they permanently settled in St. Paul, Minnesota, a city with one of the largest Hmong populations in the US. Here, Moua and her two brothers attended school while their mother farmed and sold vegetables at a farmer's market to support the family. In school, Moua developed an affinity for writing and literature. Later, as a junior at St. Olaf college in Northfield, MN, Moua was diagnosed with end-stage renal disease, which necessitated a kidney transplant. As she struggled to write about her experiences during this time, Moua also looked for guidance and inspiration in literature by fellow Hmong authors. However, to her dismay, she could not find any works by Hmong writers even in Asian-American anthologies. This discovery motivated Moua to express her own voice as well as to encourage other Hmong to express theirs.



# Mai Neng Moua

## Biography continued

The direct result of this was the publication of *Paj Ntaub Voice* in 1994. It was a 12-page, photocopied collection of essays, poetry, short stories, and artwork from Hmong writers and artists. In its introduction, Moua expresses her frustration at the lack of Hmong voices telling their own stories. She asks, “Where are our voices? . . . Why are we always waiting for others to tell our stories, to define us, to legitimate us?” She hopes the journal will stimulate a reclamation of Hmong stories by the Hmong people, and it seems to be doing so. *Paj Ntaub Voice* has been in existence for ten years now and has evolved into a “slick publication with journalistic pieces, poetry, fiction, nonfiction, photography, artwork . . . by gifted Hmong artists” (Volume 1, Issue 1). This is exactly as Moua prophesied in the first issue.

*Paj Ntaub Voice* has continued to generate a wealth of Hmong-American expression, and from it sprang *Bamboo Among the Oaks*, the first anthology of Hmong-American literary work. Moua edited as well as contributed several of her own pieces to this collection of poetry, short stories, dramas that tackle issues such as the experiences of many men and women during the war and in refugee camps, the challenges of adjusting to living in the United States, issues of cultural assimilation, and generational clashes between first- and second-generation Hmong Americans. Moreover, these honest and groundbreaking works have been adapted into the curricula of many cultural studies and literature programs around the world.

Hmong voices are gradually being heard worldwide and are demanding the attention and consideration they deserve due in large part to the determination of Moua who refused to remain silent as “others write [Hmong] stories for [them] -- leaving Hmong-Americans “in danger of accepting the images others have painted of [them]” (p. 7 BAto Introduction)

Moua still serves as editor of *Paj Ntaub Voice* as well as being the executive director of the Hmong-American Institute for Learning, a nonprofit organization devoted to the preservation and promotion of Hmong culture. In 2003, Moua received a Bush Foundation research grant that she will use to travel with her mother to Thailand and Laos in the summer of 2004 gathering research for her memoirs. Meanwhile, Moua continues to be active in the Hmong community, constantly working to bridge the gap between the ancient Hmong oral tradition and the developing written tradition.



# Mai Neng Moua

## Selected Bibliography

### Works by the author

*Bamboo Among the Oaks: Contemporary Writing by Hmong-Americans* (Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2002).